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ABSTRACT

There are some who argue that the existing theoretical paradigm used in leadership training programs should be modified to include the feminist perspective. This paper presents findings of a study that investigated male and female perceptions of effective leadership skills. Indepth interviews were conducted with 120 executives--60 men and 60 women. Half of the male and female respondents were leaders from business and government; the other half was comprised of educational leaders. Both male and female respondents perceived women as giving more attention than men to detail; men were seen by both genders as delegating detail to others. Both genders perceived men as relying on their past experiences to solve problems; women were viewed as more emotional than men and apt to seek input from others. Both men and women perceived male leaders' authority to be automatic and based on gender; women's authority was viewed as being earned over time and through hard work. The majority of respondents reported that they preferred to be supervised by males. In general, all respondents tended to see the following as strong leadership characteristics: (1) seeking input; (2) encouraging others to be involved in decision-making; (3) sharing power and credit; (4) empowering others to improve skills; and (5) maintaining open communication. However, both men and women held subtle negative views of feminine leadership traits. Men reported that their leadership styles evolved from innate abilities and on-the-job training; women said they were influenced by mentors and formal training. Differences between educational leaders and business/government leaders were not identified. (LMI)

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Constructing a Feminist - Inclusive Theory of Leadership

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Constructing a Feminist-Inclusive Theory of Leadership

Administrative preparation programs have been criticized as not applicable to the real world of school leadership (Murphy and Hallinger, 1987). While this is probably a valid concern of both men and women, women particularly feel that training programs do not address their reality (Shakeshaft, 1987). As we reform administrative preparation programs, the feminine presence in educational administration cannot be ignored. We must not limit reform efforts by merely addressing the charges of "too much theory" or of the lack of integration and practice, nor must we simply continue to examine the theories that currently exist. Rather, we must advance new theory that includes the feminine perspectives and the feminine experience. Not only would the resulting theory be relevant for feminist-inclusive educational organizations (Brown, Irby, and Smith, 1993) and for administrative training programs, but we contend that it would also address concerns raised by Rost (1994) who asserts that the current white male leadership paradigm has no relevance for the post-industrial age.

Management and leadership models are based on theories of male leadership behavior. As more women attempt to break the glass ceiling by positioning themselves for executive positions, current theory needs to be reevaluated and revalued. (The term, reevaluated, herein, deals with the technical examination of the subject, while the term, revalued, refers to an examination of deep, personal value systems.) There is a need to modify the existing male value-laden theoretical paradigm used in management and leadership training programs to include the feminist perspective.

Although there is existing, related research which documents the need for this study, currently there is not research which addresses differences in gender perceptions of leadership effectiveness in the organizational culture or in the origins of these perceptions. The lack of research in these areas of leadership results in an insufficient theory base. The literature is clear that existing management and leadership theories are not viable for women and that there needs to be a reconceptualization of theory to include experiences of both men and women (Shakeshaft, 1992).

The 1970's marked the beginning of research on women executives. There are five stages of women's study which bring us up-to-date. Those stages are: 1. numbers of women documented; 2. search for women who have been or are administrators (dealing with attitudes); 3. women as disadvantaged or subordinate (barriers women face); 4. women studied on their own terms (the world of women), and 5. women as challenge to theory (Shakeshaft, 1987). With only twenty years of research, the field is considered embryonic; the data that we do have point to two findings which strongly support the need for this research: 1. the profiles of women executives and their history in top management positions are not the same as profiles and history of men in similar positions (Shakeshaft, 1992), and 2. the legacy of discrimination and exclusion has shaped a world in which women's experiences and behaviors are often unlike those of men (Shakeshaft, 1986). An additional body of research is needed that does not currently exist but which is necessary to move to a sixth stage of women's studies -- transformation of current theory or development of new theory for up-to-date training programs. To begin construction of a new theory base, it is important to examine relationships that exist in contextual reality.

This research analyzed perceptions of leadership effectiveness in three contexts: education, business, and government. The purpose of this research was to contrast male and female perspectives of effective leadership skills. This reported research is part of a larger study designed to initiate the construction of a feminist-inclusive leadership theory.

Method

Instrument Development

The researchers began the development of the initial instrument with the following guiding questions:

1. How do male and female leaders differ in their perceptions of leadership effectiveness skills?
2. Are the origins of perceptions of leadership effectiveness skills different between male and female leaders?

Subsequently an in-depth semi-structured interview instrument was developed by the principal researchers. Thirty graduate research assistants were trained in the use of the initial instrument. One semi-structured interview followed with an extensive analysis and discussion session regarding the initial instrument. Based upon the research assistants' experiences with the initial instrument and the first round of participants, a final structured instrument was created for ease of use and for gathering comparable data across subjects. Items were designed so that they followed a natural sequence, were of reasonable length, were clearly understandable, and elicited free-flowing responses. The final structured interview instrument contained 11 questions with allowances for probes. Ongoing discussions among the research assistants and the principal researchers helped to ensure consistency in the general approach for the interviews, while allowing for individual interpretations of the data gathered.

Setting and Subjects

Rural, suburban, and urban school districts, government offices, and businesses were selected through purposeful sampling for inclusion in this study. One hundred twenty executives (60 male and 60 female; 30 male business/government leaders, 30 male educational leaders, 30 female business/government leaders, 30 female educational leaders) were included in this research. Educational leaders were defined as public school educators and in general, a leader was designated by position in a company or agency or in the public school setting as holding a high status position.

Data Collection

In-depth interviewing was conducted by 30 trained graduate research assistants. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed. Multiple copies of transcripts were used to index and sort respondents' statements by content. All data were coded independently, first by the research assistants and finally by two principal researchers. Constant-comparative procedures (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Miles and Huberman, 1984) involving inductive analyses simultaneous to data collection were employed. Emergent categories and themes were examined and revised through a series of discussions and reflective dialogue.

Results

Content analysis of the data revealed six major themes with 11 subcategories relevant for the interpretation of the data related to gender differences in perceptions of leadership effectiveness:

- Attention to Detail
- Handling of Situations

  Emotional

Personal Problems

- Authority

  Appearance

  Legitimate/Earned Authority

- Expectations of supervision

  Of Being Supervised

  Of Supervising Others

- Successful leadership
- Origins/Influences of personal leadership style

  On the Job

  Role Models

  Males

  Mentors

  Innate.

The study revealed that there are significant gender differences related to perceptions of effective leadership skills and attitudes and expectations of supervision. In addition, there are gender differences regarding authority, and finally, there are gender differences regarding origins of and influences related to leadership style.

Attention to Detail

Women were perceived by both men and women in all groups as giving more attention to detail, with women placing more value on detail. Men were perceived as tending to delegate the task of details to others and as looking at the whole picture by both men and women. Representative responses are as follows when men and women were probed about sharing their perceptions on a male or female executive's care when dealing with organizational issues in the office or company:

> "She does take care of details... that people are involved around her... has little patience with people who don't see the importance of details as she does." Male Executive
>
> "He leaves the details to others... maybe not as much direction given as the female executive." Female Executive
>
> "He is a very generalized person, not a detail person. He looks to other people to furnish him details...he can very quickly size up whether this is accurate or not accurate even if he does not have the details... he doesn't just look at one little thing." Femal Executive
>
> "Seems like most of the women leaders that I know have a whole lot more attention to details in the office than I do." Male Executive

Handling of Situations

Respondents perceived that male leaders tended to rely on their own past experiences, judgments, confidence, and skills at analyzing and solving problems, while women obtained input and were perceived as being more thoughtful in decision making. Both men and women perceived women as more emotional and as bringing more personal problems to the job which would affect their handling of situations. Following are characteristic quotes from the data:

> "Female leaders just have more emotion...female executives cry...you don't see male executives cry." Male Executive
>
> "Females tend to deal more with manipulation... they tend to manipulate more... females tend to demonstrate more passive aggression... men tend to be more straightforward...and logical." Female Executive

Authority

By both men and women, men were perceived to have legitimate or automatic power or authority based on their gender, while women were perceived to have to earn authority through the passage of time and a hard work ethic. Additionally, men's physical appearance reportedly enhanced their authority. The following types of remarks were consistent among the respondents:

> "Males have authority by their physical presence...they have a physical dominance...a louder voice, a stronger voice" Female Executive

> "Males have legitimate authority based on society's traditional view of leadership...female leaders must earn authority through blood, sweat, and tears." Female Executive

> "...a man in a leadership position who looks the part is assumed to have ability and know what he is doing...before he does anything it's assumed he will be good at it...much of perceived authority comes from visual images...is a man who is middle-aged or older, who dresses in a business-like fashion and is Anglo--not an ethnic minority." Female Executive

> "Women have to work at it harder than a man would...women might go in and have to prove her worthiness in order to have the authority bestowed on her." Male Executive

> "Males have authority just because they are males.... women... never just because they are females." Male Executive

Expectations of Supervision

While in limited instances respondents indicated that individual style and personality were more important than gender in who they preferred to supervise or be supervised by, the majority of the respondents reported that they preferred to be supervised by males. However, most respondents did not indicate a gender preference as to whom they would supervise.

> "I prefer to be supervised by males...they tend to be more straightforward in their expectations... it is too difficult for women to agree." Female Executive

> "I think it is easier to manage males and be managed by males because females tend to have a few more problems, personality problems with each other, problems at home, personal problems whereas males are just different... they don't complain as much, don't have the personality problems...with females, there's always something brewing from a personal side." Male Executive

Successful Leadership

In general, all respondents tended to see the following as strong leadership characteristics: seeking input, encouraging others to be involved in decision-making, sharing power and credit, empowering others to improve skills, and maintaining open communication (generally perceived as feminine leadership traits, Helgeson, 1990).

However, when contrasting effectiveness of male and female leaders, careful analysis of both male and female responses revealed subtle and negative connotations toward the above listed characteristics. Supporting comments are as follows:

> "Successful male leaders are effective and efficient... females...same qualities, but she must also be diplomatic...women leaders often override their own aptitudes by claiming injustice and treating everyone as beneath their intelligence." Male Executive

> "Successful male leaders are not afraid to make a decision and stand by it even in the face of its unpopularity... females have intuition, empathy, and shared leadership." Female Executive

> "A successful male leader knows what it takes to get the job done...getting others to do their work for them, or they do the job themselves.. the female... I don't see any basic difference there... one that takes care of her own business." Male Executive

Origins/Influences of Personal Leadership Style

Men talked about the origin and the influence of their personal leadership style being based upon on -the- job experiences, their own personal vision, and their innate abilities. Women were more influenced by role models, mentors, and formal training. Representative responses follow:

> "...never took any leadership type classes...most of it is on the job...and you learn a lot from people who have gone before you...trial and error." Male Executive

> "...my dad and management courses." Female Executive

> "I would say my earliest leadership training was having a good supervisor...a very positive role model and was a female...she was the best supervisor I have ever had...I've gone through a lot of leadership training." Female Executive

> "I basically developed my leadership style on the way I believe." Male Executive

Conclusion

As administrative training programs are reformed, it is critical to reevaluate and revalue the male value-laden theories upon which leadership preparation is predicated. These theories are negatively impacting the field because they a) do not address the concerns, needs, or realities of women; b) do not address differences in gender perceptions of leadership effectiveness in the organizational culture, and c) do not prepare women or men to create and work effectively in inclusive systems. The need for a leadership theory that takes women into account is well established. Admittedly, developing such a theory is complex, as well as labor and time intensive. However, this research study is an attempt to begin to approach the construction of feminist-inclusive leadership theory through investigations of gender perceptions of effective leadership.

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